

Understanding Trauma

What is trauma?

Trauma is anything that happens that the brain considers “too much” to handle. Being abused, being in a car accident, witnessing something horrific happen to someone, someone dying, or being extremely sick for a long time are some but not all examples of traumatic experiences.

What does trauma do?

Trauma makes it hard for us to access the part of the brain that helps us do the following things:

- > Make safe choices
- > Remember things
- > Regulate our emotions
- > Focus on difficult things (for kids, being in class and learning new things may be hard)



For example, if a **Lion** walked into the room (or car or space) you are in right now, you would probably do one of four things:



Fight

You might try to fight the Lion.



Freeze

You might try to stay very still and hope it doesn't notice you.



Flight

You might try to run away or hide.



Appease

You might try to negotiate with the Lion: “Listen, I don't have much meat on me, I won't taste good”; “Wouldn't you rather have some honey?”

For children (and adults), the Lion represents the trauma they experienced.

When we experience trauma, and we don't get support to process what happened, **EVERYTHING** can seem like a Lion. For instance, if a teacher raised their voice at a child who has experienced abuse, the child may perceive the teacher to be a threat, in the same way their abuser was a threat. The child may then respond as though the teacher is the threat.



They might **fight** the teacher.
(talk back/get smart)



They might **freeze**.

(withdraw in class, get quiet, not participate)



They might **take flight** from the situation.

(start daydreaming/get fidgety or distracted)



They might try to **appease** the teacher.

(try to be good all the time, become very helpful)

How can we, as caregivers, support youth who survived trauma?

- **Take care of ourselves.**

Our children do better when their caregivers are healthy and taken care of. Make sure we are practicing our self-care. Self-care can look like any of the actions below or other practices that help you, that you like to do, and that can help calm and relax you.

- Going to therapy or mental health counseling
- Exercising
- Spending time with people we love and trust
- Eating healthy
- Drinking water
- Asking for help
- Praying/meditating

- **Be patient with youth who have survived trauma.**

- Give one- or two-step instructions
- Write things down for them
- Manage our emotions so we can be firm but gentle when disciplining

- **Encourage youth to practice self-care.**

- Getting lots of rest/sleep
- Exercising
- Drinking water
- Eating healthy
- Getting therapy or mental health counseling

- **Validate youth experiences and feelings if/when they share them with us.**

- Instead of saying, “Everything will be okay,” try:
“Thank you for telling me that. It makes sense that you feel.....”
“You’re right. That stinks. I’m sorry.”
“What would be helpful right now?”

Children are resilient. If we give them love and support, they can thrive in spite of the trauma they have survived.

A tip sheet from

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